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DOCTOR
STRANGE
A MIDSUMMER'S NIGHTMARE!

Stan Lee presents: Dr. STRANGE — MASTER OF THE MYSTIC ARTS!™

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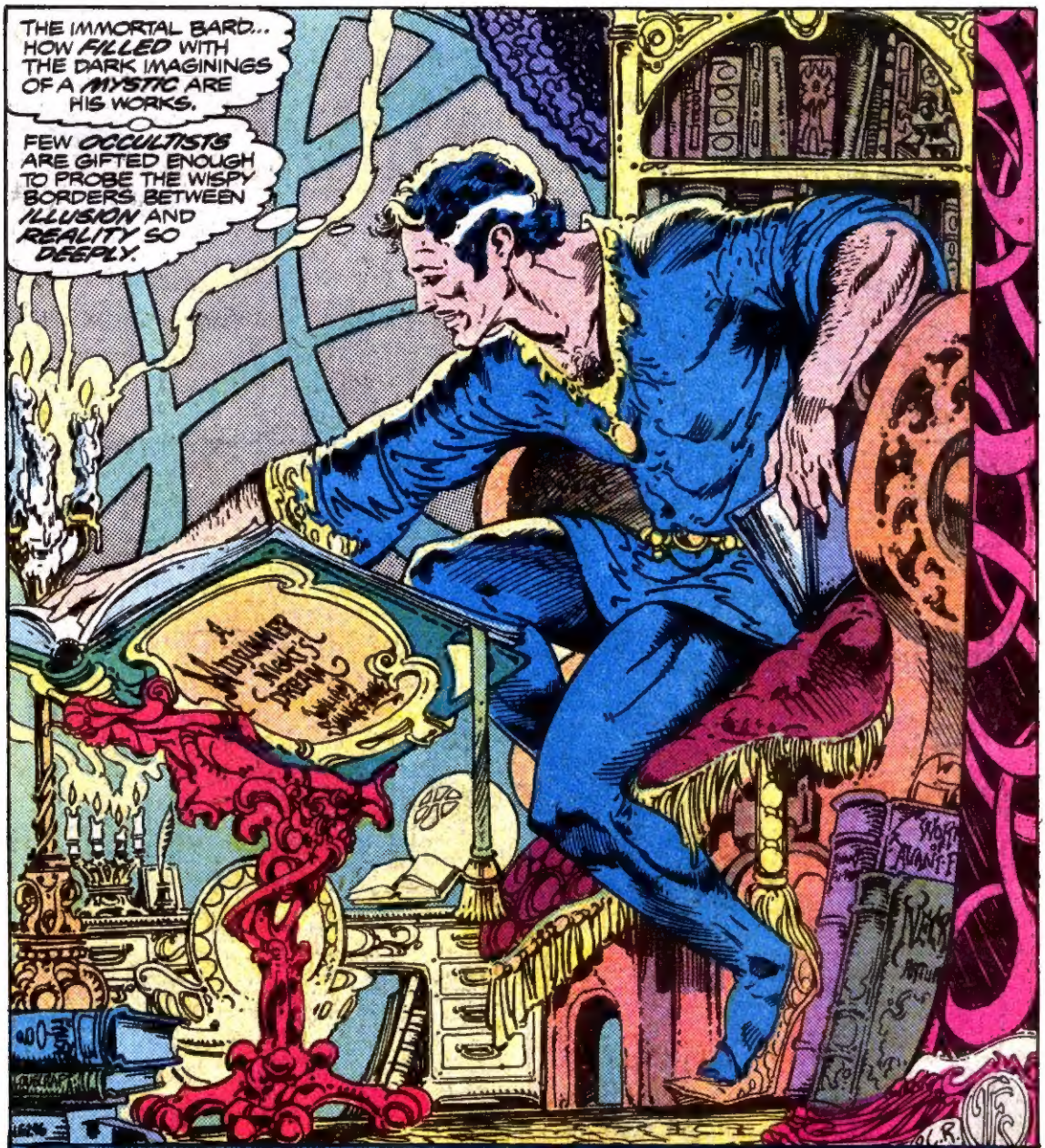
THE IMMORTAL BARD... HOW FILLED WITH THE DARK IMAGININGS OF A MYSTIC ARE HIS WORKS.
FEW OCCULTISTS ARE GIFTED ENOUGH TO PROBE THE WISPY BORDERS BETWEEN ILLUSION AND REALITY SO DEEPLY.
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

A MIDSUMMER'S NIGHTMARE!

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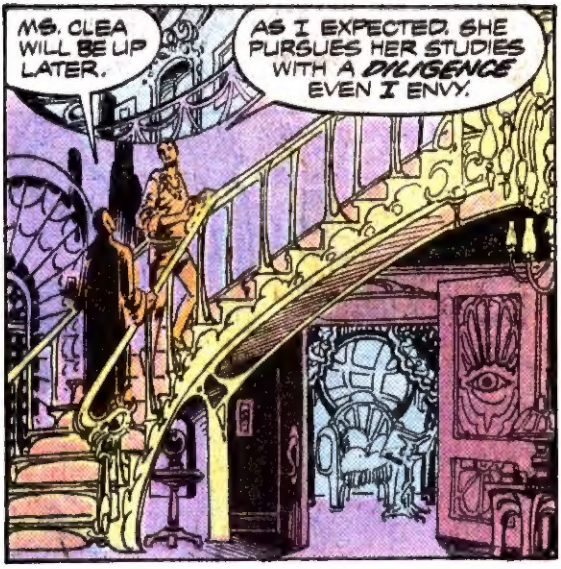
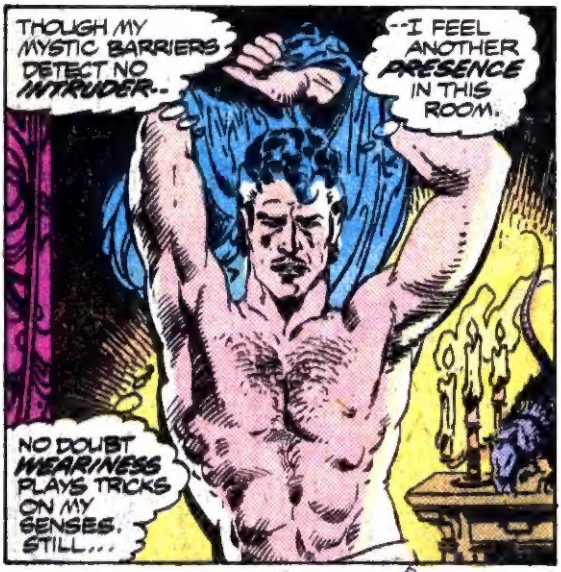
YOUR PARDON, MASTER. I HAVE THE TEA YOU REQUESTED.
THANK YOU, WONG. BRING IT UPSTAIRS, PLEASE, I'M THROUGH FOR THE EVENING.

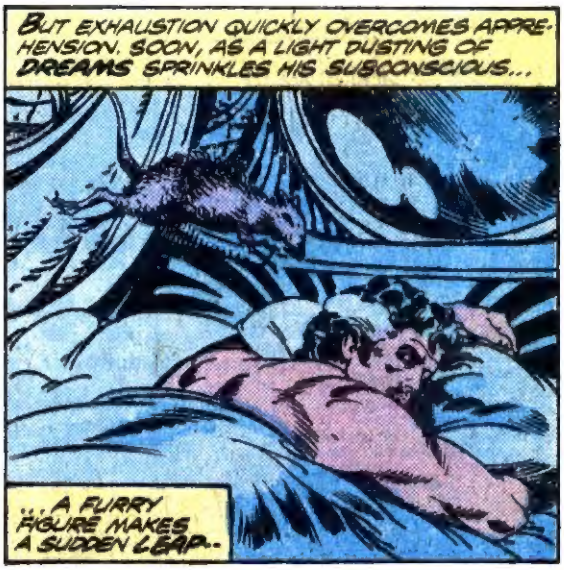

MS. CLEA WILL BE UP LATER.
AS I EXPECTED. SHE PURSUES HER STUDIES WITH A DILIGENCE EVEN I ENVY.

STILL, THERE ARE MOMENTS WHEN I WORRY ABOUT HER, WONG. SHE IS STILL AN ALIEN--A STRANGER IN THIS WORLD.
PERHAPS I'VE STRIVEN TOO HARD TO BE BOTH FATHER-FIGURE AND LOVER--AND NOW SHE'S REACTING TO IT. IF ONLY HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS COULD BE ALTERED AS EASILY AS I CAST A SPELL.
AFFAIRS OF THE HEART ARE EVER BEYOND THE POWERS OF THE MAGICIAN... BUT ALWAYS WITHIN REACH OF THE MAN.

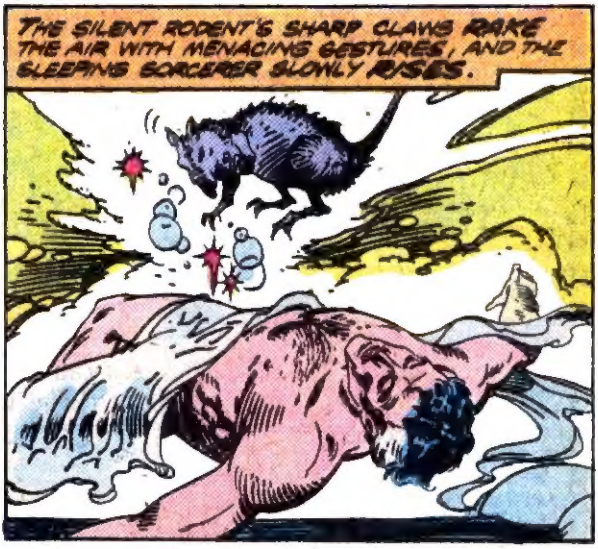
YOUR WISDOM IN SUCH MATTERS EXPOSES ME FOR A NOVICE, FAITHFUL ONE.
SLEEP WELL, MASTER. I'LL SEE THAT YOU'RE NOT DISTURBED.

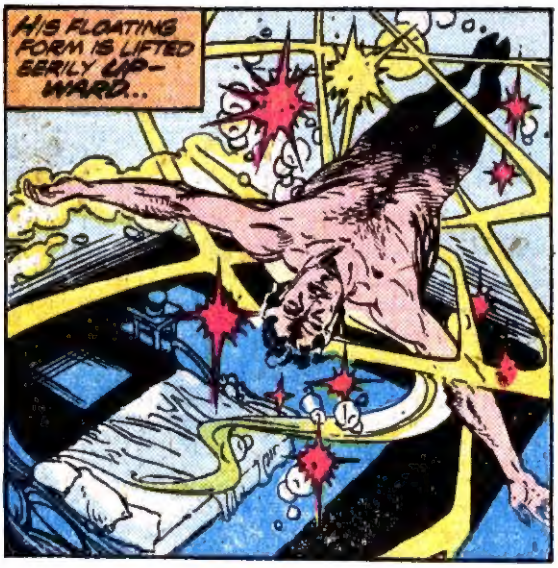
YOU NEEDN'T BOTHER. NOT ALL THE DEMONS OF DORMAMMU COULD AWAKEN ME THIS EVENING. GOOD NIGHT.

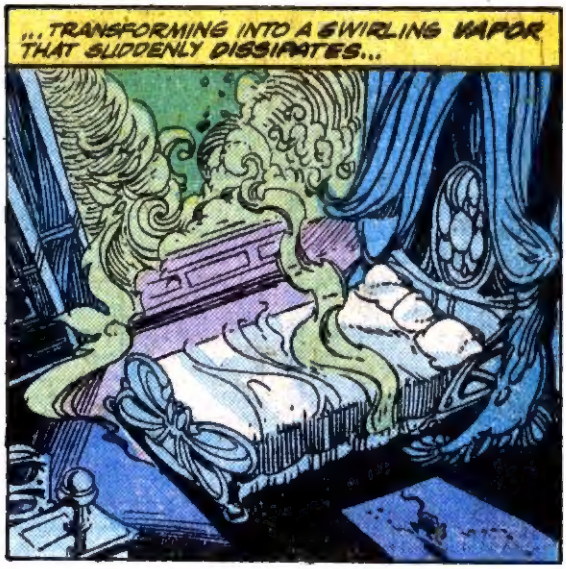

THOUGH MY MYSTIC BARRIERS DETECT NO INTRUDER--
--I FEEL ANOTHER PRESENCE IN THIS ROOM.
NO DOUBT WEARINESS PLAYS TRICKS ON MY SENSES. STILL...

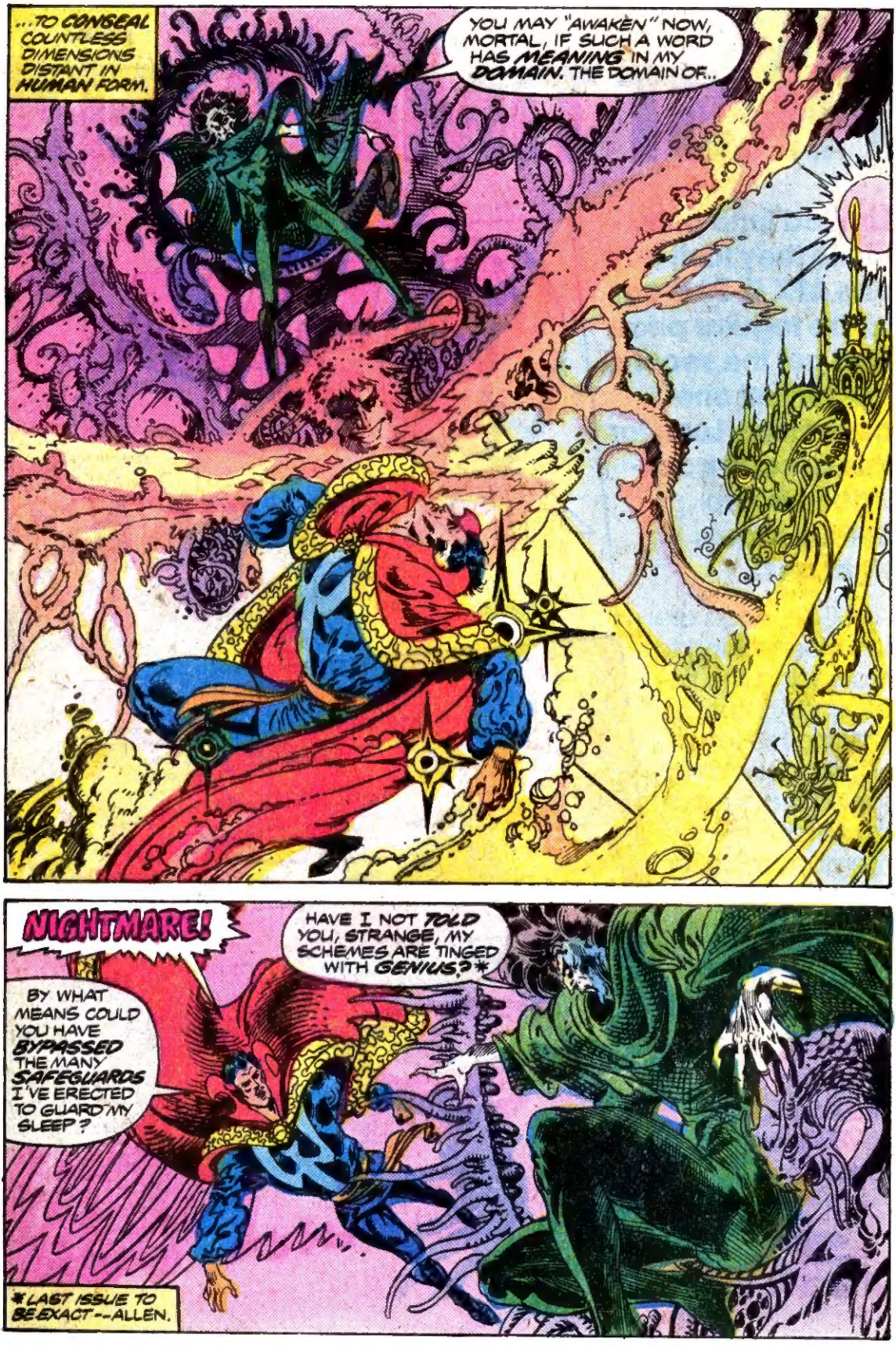

BUT EXHAUSTION QUICKLY OVERCOMES APPREHENSION. SOON, AS A LIGHT DUSTING OF DREAMS SPRINKLES HIS SUBCONSCIOUS...
...A FURRY FIGURE MAKES A SUDDEN LEAP..

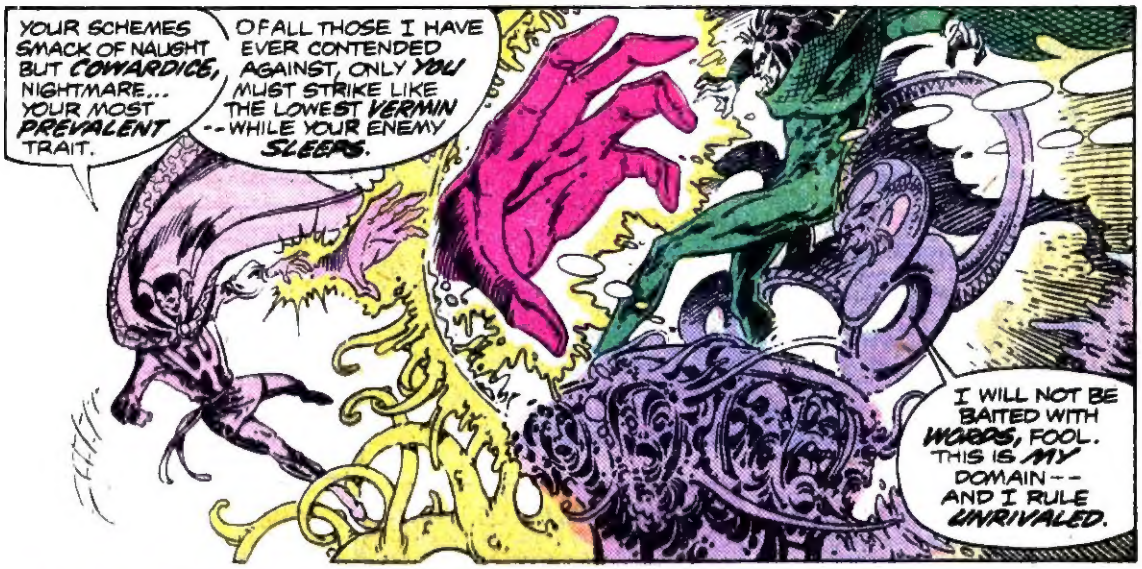
...AND SCURRIES TO THE MYSTIC MASTER'S PILLOW.


THE SILENT RODENT'S SHARP CLAWS RAKE THE AIR WITH MENACING GESTURES, AND THE SLEEPING SORCERER SLOWLY RISES.

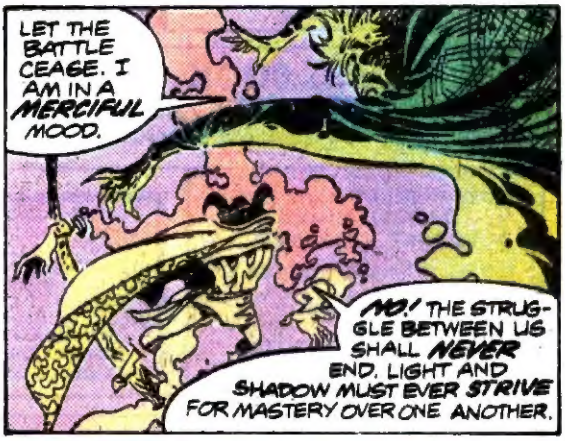

HIS FLOATING FORM IS LIFTED EERILY UPWARD..

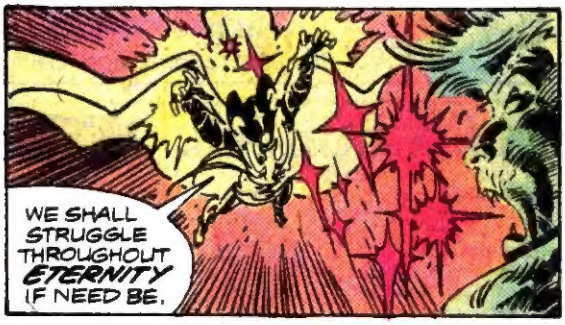

...TRANSFORMING INTO A SWIRLING VAPOR THAT SUDDENLY DISSIPATES...


...TO CONCEAL COUNTLESS DIMENSIONS DISTANT IN HUMAN FORM.
YOU MAY "AWAKEN" NOW, MORTAL, IF SUCH A WORD HAS MEANING IN MY DOMAIN. THE DOMAIN OF..
NIGHTMARE!
BY WHAT MEANS COULD YOU HAVE BYPASSED THE MANY SAFEGUARDS I'VE ERECTED TO GUARD MY SLEEP?
HAVE I NOT TOLD YOU, STRANGE, MY SCHEMES ARE TINGED WITH GENIUS?*
*LAST ISSUE TO BE EXACT--ALLEN.

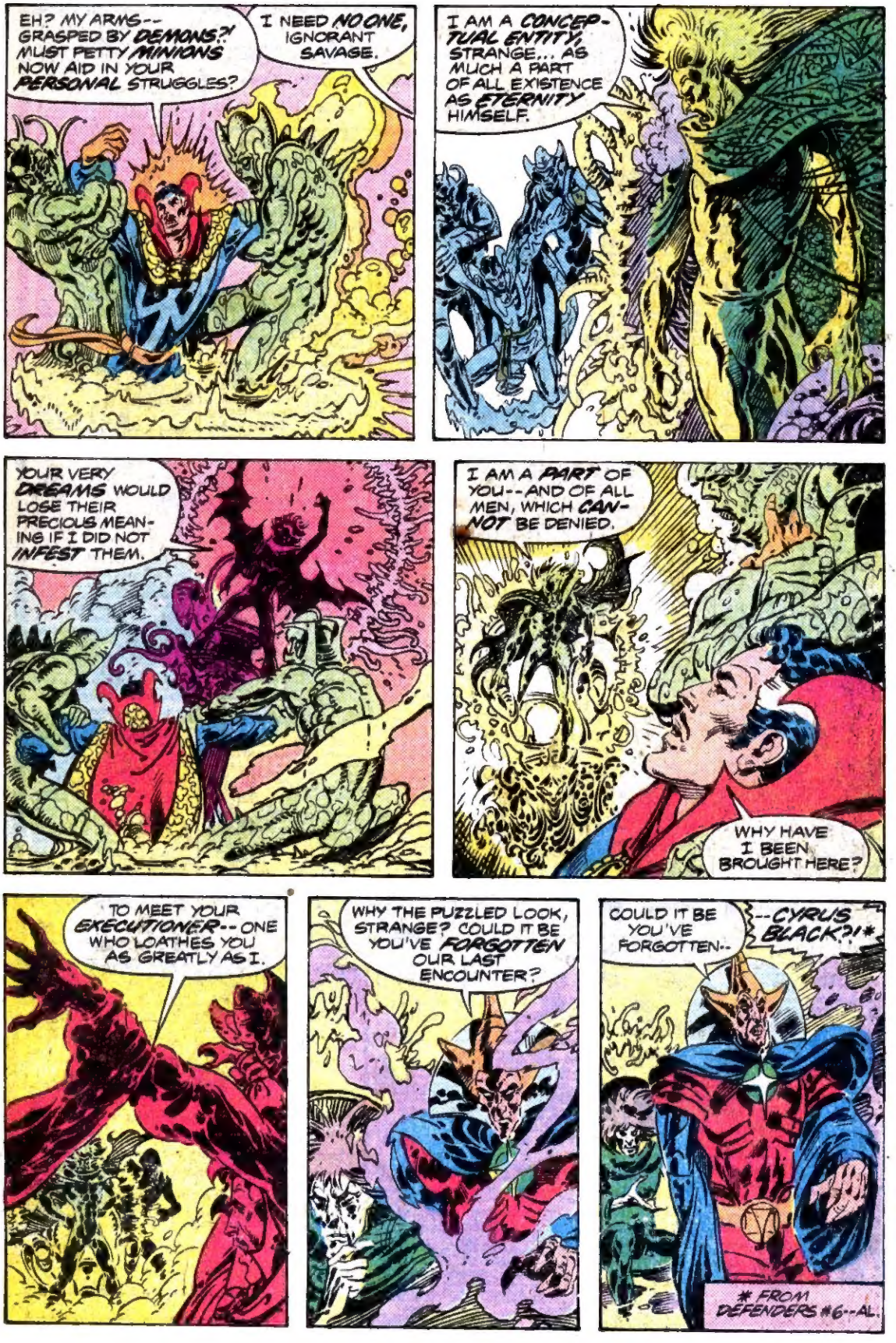

YOUR SCHEMES SMACK OF NAUGHT BUT COWARDICE, NIGHTMARE... YOUR MOST PREVALENT TRAIT.
OF ALL THOSE I HAVE EVER CONTENDED AGAINST, ONLY YOU MUST STRIKE LIKE THE LOWEST VERMIN --WHILE YOUR ENEMY SLEEPS.
I WILL NOT BE BAITED WITH WORDS, FOOL. THIS IS MY DOMAIN -- AND I RULE UNRIVALED.

AAARRHH!
HERE, EVEN THE GREATEST OF SORCERERS ARE NO MORE THAN MERE CHILDREN...
... CHILDREN TO BE PUNISHED FOR SEEKING TO DISPUTE MY MASTERY.

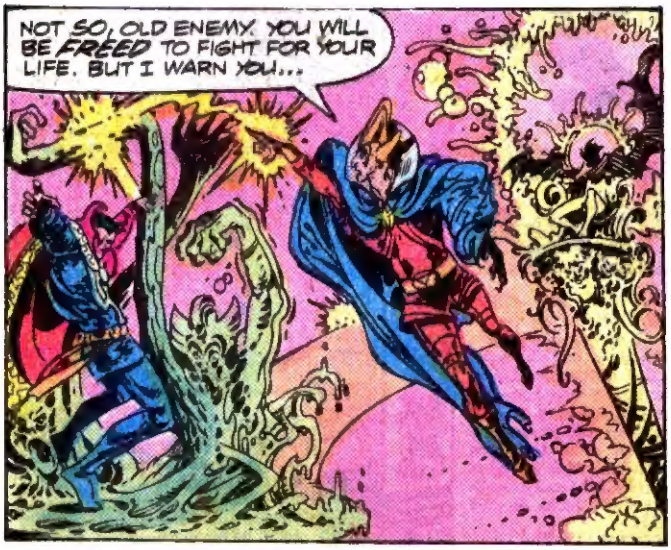

LET THE BATTLE CEASE. I AM IN A MERCIFUL MOOD.
NO! THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN US SHALL NEVER END. LIGHT AND SHADOW MUST EVER STRIVE FOR MASTERY OVER ONE ANOTHER.


WE SHALL STRUGGLE THROUGHOUT ETERNITY IF NEED BE.

THUS, LET THE SCORCHING LIGHT OF THE SEVEN SUNS OF CINNIBUS SMITE YOU--
--WITH AN ALL-CONSUMING BRILLIANCE THAT DRIVES THE DARKNESS BEFORE IT.

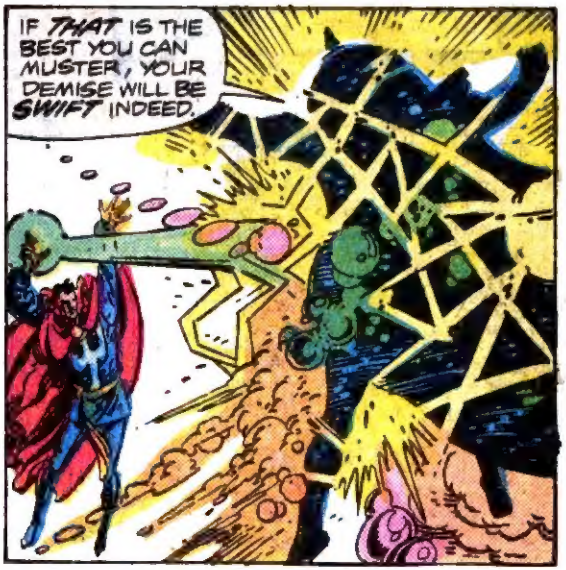

EH? MY ARMS-- GRASPED BY DEMONS?! MUST PETTY MINIONS NOW AID IN YOUR PERSONAL STRUGGLES?
I NEED NO ONE, IGNORANT SAVAGE.
I AM A CONCEPTUAL ENTITY, STRANGE... AS MUCH A PART OF ALL EXISTENCE AS ETERNITY HIMSELF.
YOUR VERY DREAMS WOULD LOSE THEIR PRECIOUS MEANING IF I DID NOT INFEST THEM.
I AM A PART OF YOU--AND OF ALL MEN, WHICH CANNOT BE DENIED.
WHY HAVE I BEEN BROUGHT HERE?
TO MEET YOUR EXECUTIONER--ONE WHO LOATHES YOU AS GREATLY AS I.
WHY THE PUZZLED LOOK, STRANGE? COULD IT BE YOU'VE FORGOTTEN OUR LAST ENCOUNTER?
COULD IT BE YOU'VE FORGOTTEN-- --CYRUS BLACK?!*
* FROM DEFENDERS #6--AL.

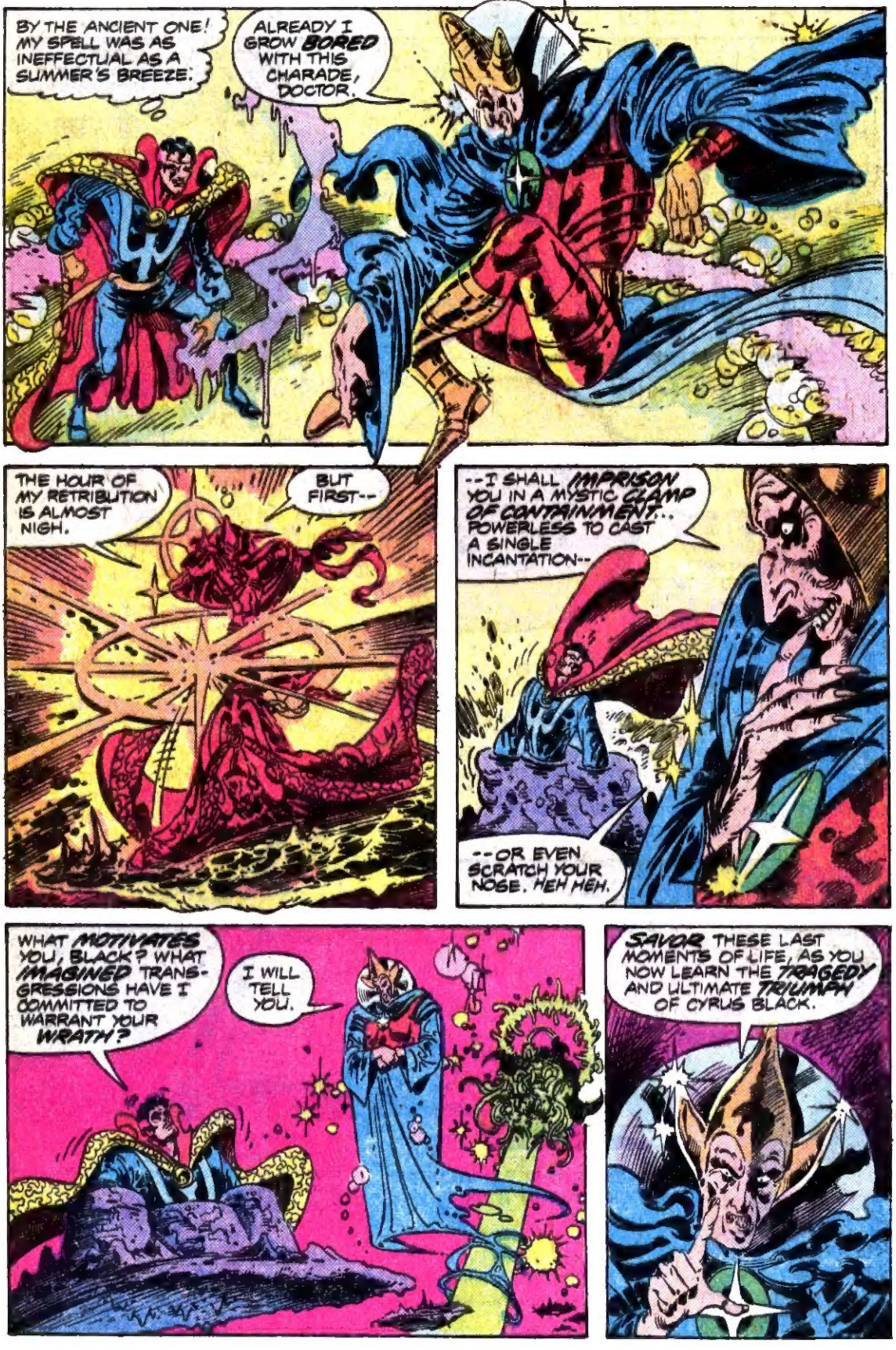
NO LONGER AM I THE MINOR MYSTIC YOU DEFEATED IN THE PAST. I HAVE BEEN REBORN.
CAN YOU NOT SEE THAT?
I SEE ONLY A COWARD ABOUT TO SLAY A DEFENSE-LESS FOE.


NOT SO, OLD ENEMY. YOU WILL BE FREED TO FIGHT FOR YOUR LIFE. BUT I WARN YOU...

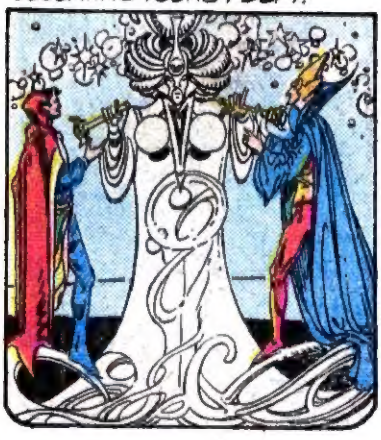
...MY POWER IS GREAT ENOUGH TO CHALLENGE THE VISHANTI THEMSELVES.

AND SHALL I QUAKE WITH FEAR AS I AWAIT MY END?
NO. SIMPLY HURL YOUR MIGHTIEST SPELL AT ME. NOW.
VERY WELL.

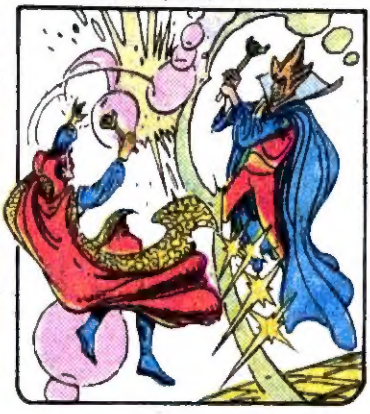

IF THAT IS THE BEST YOU CAN MUSTER, YOUR DEMISE WILL BE SWIFT INDEED.


BY THE ANCIENT ONE! MY SPELL WAS AS INEFFECTUAL AS A SUMMER'S BREEZE.
ALREADY I GROW BORED WITH THIS CHARADE, DOCTOR.
THE HOUR OF MY RETRIBUTION IS ALMOST NIGH.
BUT FIRST--
--I SHALL IMPRISON YOU IN A MYSTIC CLAMP OF CONTAINMENT... POWERLESS TO CAST A SINGLE INCANTATION--
--OR EVEN SCRATCH YOUR NOSE. HEH HEH.
WHAT MOTIVATES YOU, BLACK? WHAT IMAGINED TRANSGRESSIONS HAVE I COMMITTED TO WARRANT YOUR WRATH?
I WILL TELL YOU.
SAVOR THESE LAST MOMENTS OF LIFE, AS YOU NOW LEARN THE TRAGEDY AND ULTIMATE TRIUMPH OF CYRUS BLACK.

"WE FIRST MET YEARS AGO IN THE DIMENSION OF **WATOOMB**, WHEN HE RETIRED FROM MYSTIC AFFAIRS AND WISHED TO PASS HIS AWESOME **WAND** ON TO SOME DESERVING YOUNG ADEPT.



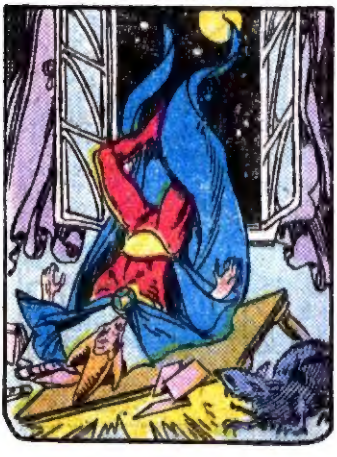
"AT WATOOMB'S DIRECTION, WE EACH TOOK **HALF** THE WAND AND BATTLED EACH OTHER LIKE THE APPRENTICES WE WERE, HOPING VICTORY WOULD ALLOW ONE OF US TO POSSESS THE **COMPLETE** WAND.



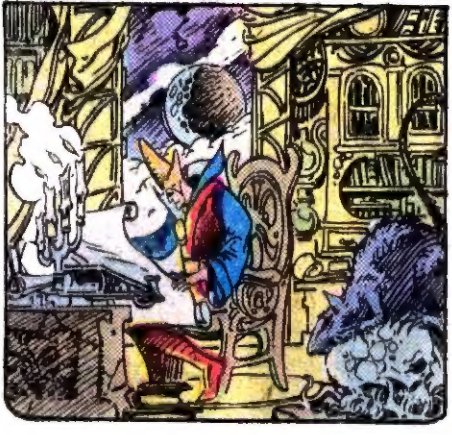
"THOUGH YOU **DEFEATED** ME, STRANGE, I LATER LEARNED **MY HALF** OF THE WAND WAS STOLEN SHORTLY **AFTER** OUR CONTEST BY THE SORCERER **XANDU** *, THUS DEPRIVING YOU OF IT.

* SEE SPIDER-MAN ANNUAL #2 --ALLEN.

"I RETURNED TO EARTH, **CRUSHED** BY MY LOSS... ALMOST READY TO **END** MY OCCULT DABBLINGS.

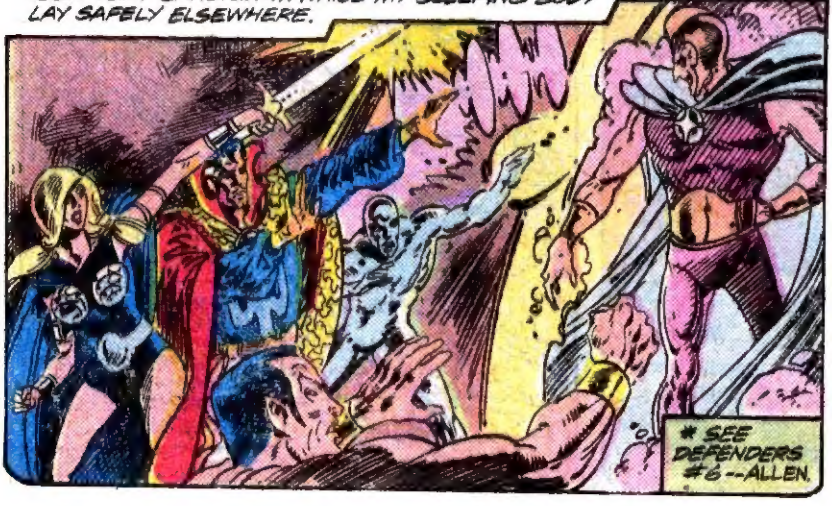


"INSTEAD, I STOKED THE FIRES OF **REVENGE**, PROBING THE MYSTIC ARTS MORE **DEEPLY** THAN BEFORE -- WATCHED OVER BY NONE SAVE MY RODENT FAMILIAR, **NEBUCHADNEZZAR**.



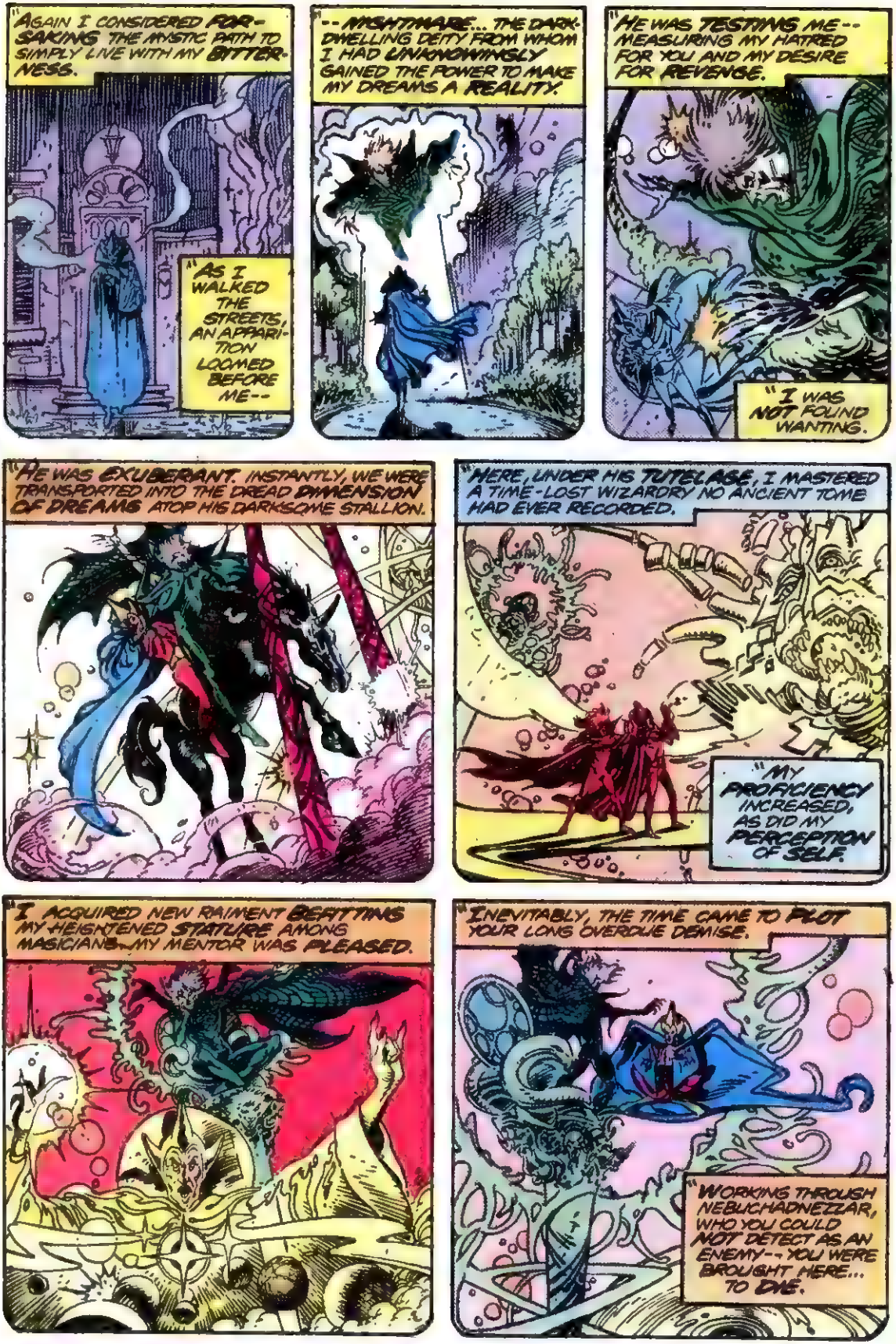
"EVENTUALLY, I **ACHIEVED** THE POWER I CRAVED -- OR SO I **THOUGHT**, AND I SOUGHT YOUR DESTRUCTION.

"I CREATED AN INVINCIBLE DREAM PERSONIFICATION OF MYSELF TO **STRIKE** AT YOU AND THOSE CALLED THE **DEFENDERS** *, IN YOUR VERY SANCTUM... WHILE MY SLEEPING BODY LAY SAFELY ELSEWHERE.



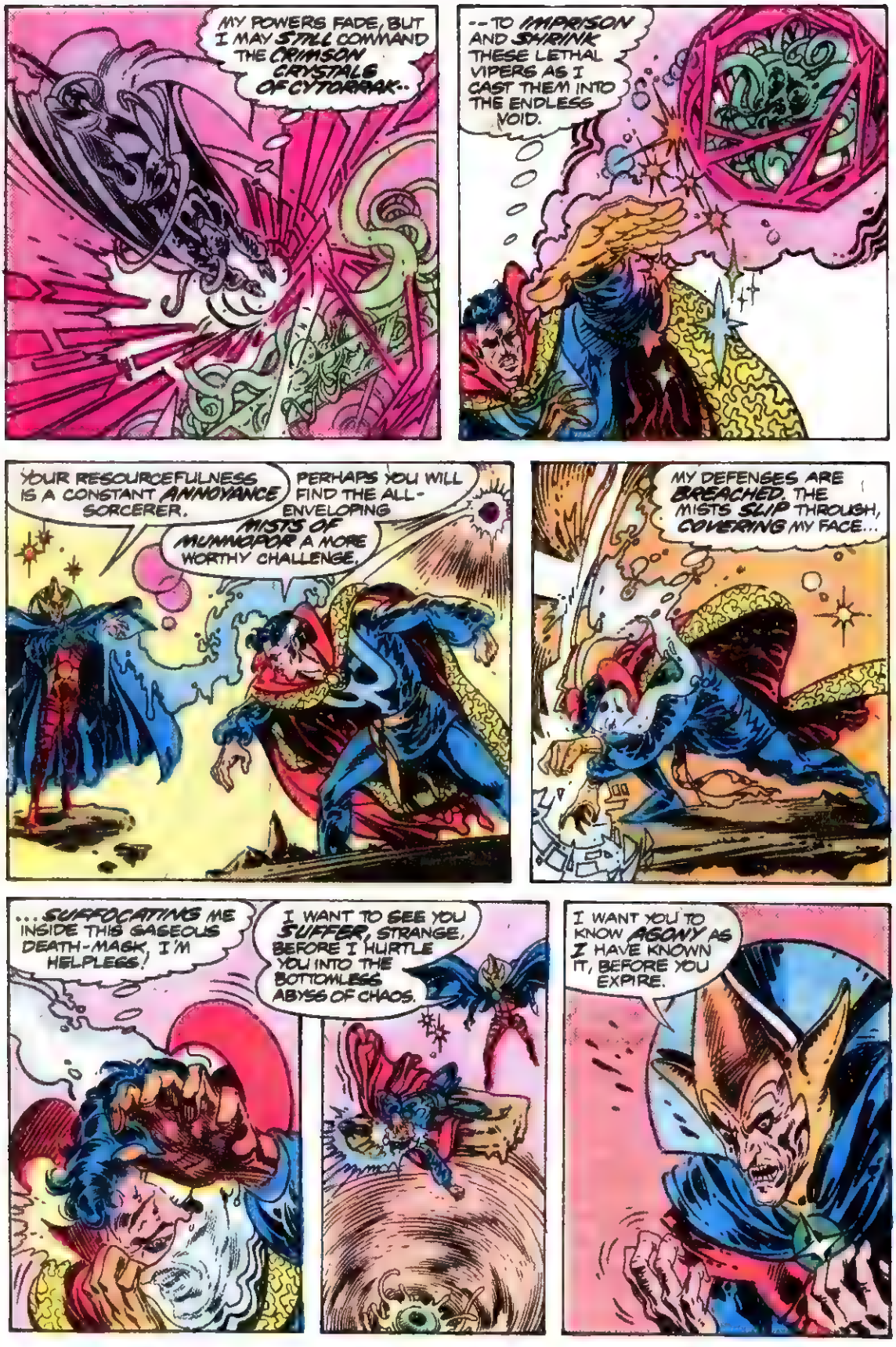
* SEE DEFENDERS #6 --ALLEN.

"THROUGH **TRICKERY**, I WAS **VANQUISHED**, AND SUFFERED DEFEAT YET **AGAIN** AT YOUR WRETCHED HANDS.


"AGAIN I CONSIDERED FORSAKING THE MYSTIC PATH TO SIMPLY LIVE WITH MY BITTERNESS.
"AS I WALKED THE STREETS, AN APPARITION LOOMED BEFORE ME--
--NIGHTMARE... THE DARK-DWELLING DEITY FROM WHOM I HAD UNKNOWINGLY GAINED THE POWER TO MAKE MY DREAMS A REALITY.
"HE WAS TESTING ME--MEASURING MY HATRED FOR YOU AND MY DESIRE FOR REVENGE.
"I WAS NOT FOUND WANTING.
"HE WAS EXUBERANT. INSTANTLY, WE WERE TRANSPORTED INTO THE DREAD DIMENSION OF DREAMS ATOP HIS DARKSOME STALLION.
"HERE, UNDER HIS TUTELAGE, I MASTERED A TIME-LOST WIZARDRY NO ANCIENT TOME HAD EVER RECORDED.
"MY PROFICIENCY INCREASED, AS DID MY PERCEPTION OF SELF.
"I ACQUIRED NEW RAIMENT BEFITTING MY HEIGHTENED STATURE AMONG MASICIANS--MY MENTOR WAS PLEASED.
"INEVITABLY, THE TIME CAME TO PLOT YOUR LONG OVERDUE DEMISE.
"WORKING THROUGH NEBUCHADNEZZAR, WHO YOU COULD NOT DETECT AS AN ENEMY--YOU WERE BROUGHT HERE... TO DIE.

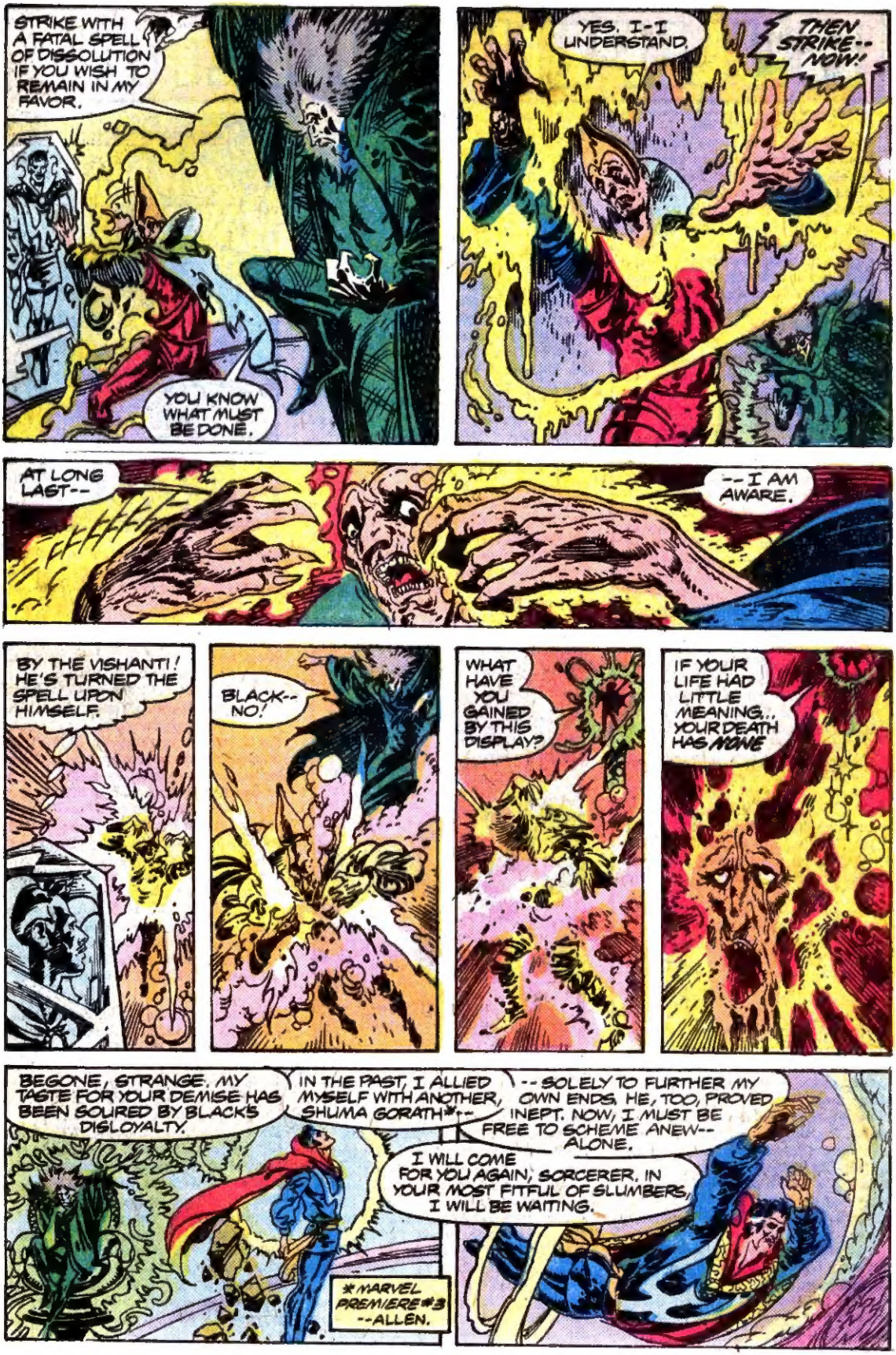
PRAY TO YOUR GODS NOW, STRANGE... FOR YOU WILL SOON MEET THEM.
I THINK NOT, BLACK.
YOUR RAMBLINGS HAVE ALLOWED ME TO MUSTER MY STRENGTH...
...STRENGTH I NOW USE TO CALL UPON THE CRIMSON BANDS OF CYTORRAK AND SUNDER YOUR CLUMSY PRISON.
I MUST STRIKE WHILE HE IS STUNNED.
YOU HAVE ONLY DELAYED YOUR DEATH-- NOT AVOIDED IT.
LET THE UNQUENCHABLE FLAMES OF THE FALTINE CONSUME YOU IN THEIR EMERALD EMBRACE.
BAH! WITH THE MEREST PASS OF MY HAND THEY ARE SNUFFED OUT OF EXISTENCE.
YET, DESPITE MY POWER, YOUR EYES MOCK ME-- AS THEY ALWAYS HAVE.
VERY WELL. YOUR DEATH WILL COME SLOWLY-- SLOWLY AT THE CONSTRICTING COILS OF...

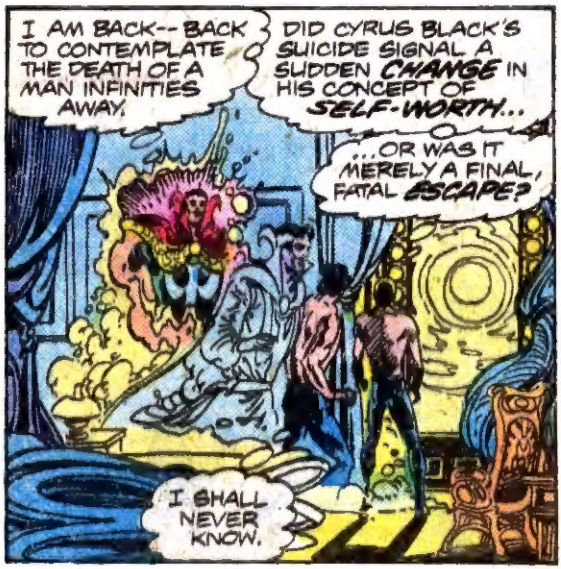
...THE VIPERS OF VALTORR!
BY HOGGOTH! I AM BEGET FROM EVERY ANGLE BY WRITHING TENDRILS.
FOR EVERY GRASPING APPENDAGE I PARRY, MORE ARISE IN ITS PLACE.
I MUST CONJURE A MYSTIC SCREEN TO SHIELD ME BEFORE I AM HOPELESELY ENSNARED.
USELESS... THEY PASS THROUGH UNHINDERED BY MY MAGICKS.
I-I CANNOT FREE MYSELF LONG ENOUGH TO CAST A POTENT SPELL.
UUNGH! THE CONSTRICTION GROWS TIGHTER! SECONDS MORE AND I WILL BE LOST.
YOUR DEATH THROES ARE AN UPLIFTING SIGHT, STRANGE. DO PROLONG THEM.

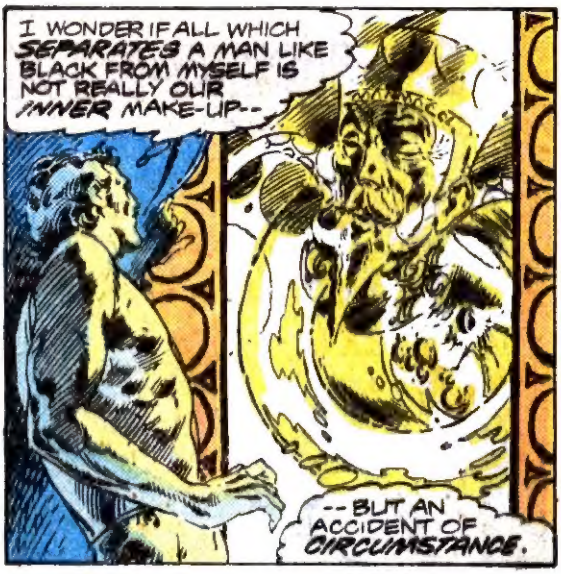

MY POWERS FADE, BUT I MAY STILL COMMAND THE CRIMSON CRYSTALS OF CYTORRAK..
--TO IMPRISON AND SHRINK THESE LETHAL VIPERS AS I CAST THEM INTO THE ENDLESS VOID.
YOUR RESOURCEFULNESS IS A CONSTANT ANNOYANCE SORCERER.
PERHAPS YOU WILL FIND THE ALL-ENVELOPING MISTS OF MUMMOPOR A MORE WORTHY CHALLENGE.
MY DEFENSES ARE BREACHED. THE MISTS SLIP THROUGH, COVERING MY FACE...
...SUFFOCATING ME INSIDE THIS GASEOUS DEATH-MASK. I'M HELPLESS!
I WANT TO SEE YOU SUFFER, STRANGE, BEFORE I HURTLE YOU INTO THE BOTTOMLESS ABYSS OF CHAOS.
I WANT YOU TO KNOW AGONY AS I HAVE KNOWN IT, BEFORE YOU EXPIRE.

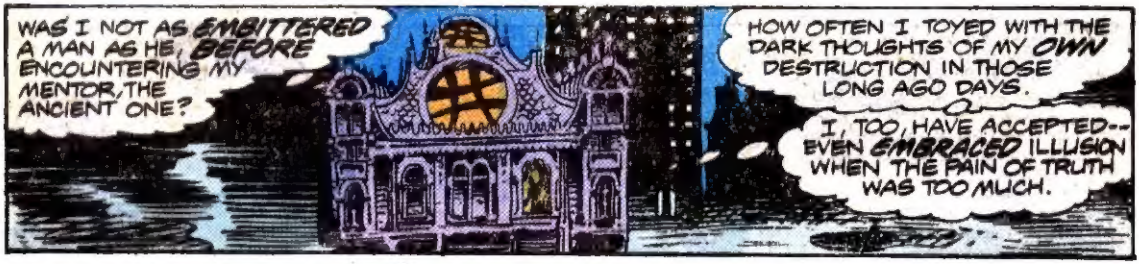
END HIS LIFE-- NOW!
HE MUST DIE SLOWLY.
MUST CONCENTRATE-- FOCUS ON ONE FINAL ATTEMPT.
WITH ONE OF STRANGE'S ILK, A DELAY MAY PROVE YOUR UNDOING. BE DONE WITH HIM!
YES. YES!
AIR-- RUSHING TO ME. I'VE SUCCEEDED.
AND NOW, BLACK, YOU FORCE MY HAND. I WOULD HAVE SPARED YOU THIS IF I COULD.
LET AGAMOTTO'S ALL-REVEALING LIGHT ILLUME THE EMPTINESS OF YOUR TAINTED SOUL.
THE TRUTH, BLACK... CAN YOU STAND IN ITS NAKED GLOW-- OR WILL YOU WITHER AND FALL?
NOOOOOOOO...

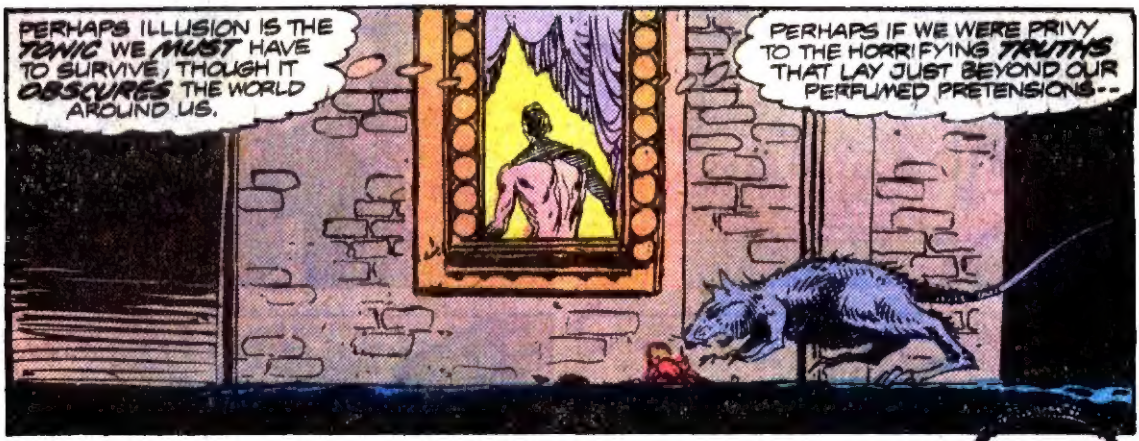
YOUR LIFE IS A SHAM, BLACK. YOUR ONLY REALITY IS THE REFUGE OF ILLUSION.
P-PLEASE STOP. NO MORE.
YOU HAVE MISTAKEN SHADOWS FOR SUBSTANCE FOR SO LONG--
--THEY HAVE BECOME INDISTINGUISHABLE TO YOU.
WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME?
I GIVE YOU A GIFT, BLACK... A GIFT OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE.
DO YOU LIKE WHAT YOU SEE?
THE TRUE MYSTIC IS NOT RULED BY THE TAWDRY TRAPPINGS OF POWER...
...HE IS MOVED BY THE SUBLIME STIRRINGS FELT DEEP WITHIN HIM.
ENOUGH! YOU ARE NOT HERE TO SPOUT FAULTY PHILOSOPHIES.
AAAARRGH!
YOU WERE BROUGHT HERE TO DIE!
HE WAS MINE, NIGHTMARE. WHY--?
BE SILENT, BLACK. I HAVE NOT KILLED HIM, THOUGH HE SPOKE THE TRUTH ABOUT YOU.
YOU ARE CONTEMPTIBLE.

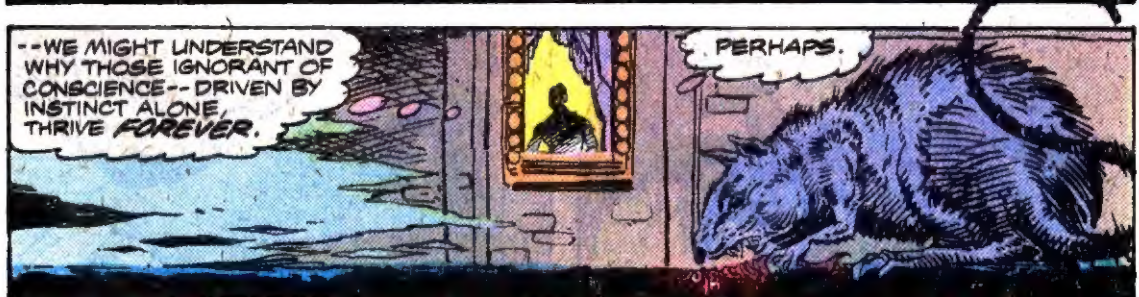

STRIKE WITH A FATAL SPELL OF DISSOLUTION IF YOU WISH TO REMAIN IN MY FAVOR.
YOU KNOW WHAT MUST BE DONE.
YES. I-I UNDERSTAND.
THEN STRIKE-- NOW!
AT LONG LAST--
--I AM AWARE.
BY THE VISHANTI! HE'S TURNED THE SPELL UPON HIMSELF.
BLACK-- NO!
WHAT HAVE YOU GAINED BY THIS DISPLAY?
IF YOUR LIFE HAD LITTLE MEANING.. YOUR DEATH HAS *NONE*
BEGONE, STRANGE. MY TASTE FOR YOUR DEMISE HAS BEEN SOURED BY BLACK'S DISLOYALTY.
IN THE PAST, I ALLIED MYSELF WITH ANOTHER, SHUMA GORATH*--
--SOLELY TO FURTHER MY OWN ENDS. HE, TOO, PROVED INEPT. NOW, I MUST BE FREE TO SCHEME ANEW-- ALONE.
I WILL COME FOR YOU AGAIN, SORCERER. IN YOUR MOST FITFUL OF SLUMBERS, I WILL BE WAITING.
*MARVEL PREMIERE #3 --ALLEN.


I AM BACK-- BACK TO CONTEMPLATE THE DEATH OF A MAN INFINITIES AWAY.
DID CYRUS BLACK'S SUICIDE SIGNAL A SUDDEN CHANGE IN HIS CONCEPT OF SELF-WORTH...
...OR WAS IT MERELY A FINAL, FATAL ESCAPE?
I SHALL NEVER KNOW.


I WONDER IF ALL WHICH SEPARATES A MAN LIKE BLACK FROM MYSELF IS NOT REALLY OUR INNER MAKE-UP--
--BUT AN ACCIDENT OF CIRCUMSTANCE.


WAS I NOT AS EMBITTERED A MAN AS HE, BEFORE ENCOUNTERING MY MENTOR, THE ANCIENT ONE?
HOW OFTEN I TOYED WITH THE DARK THOUGHTS OF MY OWN DESTRUCTION IN THOSE LONG AGO DAYS.
I, TOO, HAVE ACCEPTED-- EVEN EMBRACED ILLUSION WHEN THE PAIN OF TRUTH WAS TOO MUCH.


PERHAPS ILLUSION IS THE TONIC WE MUST HAVE TO SURVIVE, THOUGH IT OBSCURES THE WORLD AROUND US.
PERHAPS IF WE WERE PRIVY TO THE HORRIFYING TRUTHS THAT LAY JUST BEYOND OUR PERFUMED PRETENSIONS--



NEXT: "OF KNIGHTS AND PAWNS!"

GUEST-STARRING THE AVENGERS AND THE BLACK KNIGHT!